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RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE  
INFO RUEHBC/REO BASRAH 0274

UNCLAS BASRAH 000026

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: BASRAH ERUPTS AFTER DESTRUCTION OF SAMARRA MOSQUE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Protests erupted in Basrah after the media carried stories of the destruction of the Golden Mosque in Samarra. The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) building was attacked and damaged and several IIP party members were injured. No deaths have been confirmed at this time. More demonstrations are expected in the days ahead. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The explosion of the Golden Mosque in Samarra on February 22 triggered Shia demonstrations throughout southern Iraq. Demonstrations and gatherings turned violent in Basrah, and the following briefly describes the events on this date as reported to the Regional Embassy Office (REO) by its employees and contacts. Septel reports the meeting of the REO's Emergency Action Committee.

¶3. (SBU) Shortly after noon, 100-150 agitated demonstrators gathered outside the Basrah Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) headquarters. A REO local employee described the demonstrators as Jayish Al Mahdi fighters armed with AK-47s, who said they were waiting for orders from Muqtada al Sadr. Muqtada al Sadr later issued a statement calling for peaceful demonstrations only, and that no mosques should be touched. A local journalist contacted the REO and reported that markets were closing to allow people to attend the OMS demonstration. Local clerics in Basrah reportedly called on their congregations to join the OMS demonstration. Seyid Ali Al Musawi led a demonstration in front of the Grand Mosque in Basrah condemning Sunnis.

¶3. (SBU) A National Democratic Institute representative present at the REO received a call from the IIP campaign manager, who stated that he and two other party members were trapped in the IIP headquarter building and that an angry mob was attacking the building. He called again later to report that they had escaped the building and no one had been killed, but that the three of them had received gunshot wounds. He reported that the IIP building was completely destroyed. Another IIP party member reported that the attack on the headquarters resulted in several deaths and injuries, but REO staff was unable to verify this information. British military reportedly arrived at the IIP building several hours after the attack began; REO Basrah has not yet been able to compare our reports with that of the British military. (Comment: REO Basrah received other reports that the IIP was damaged but not destroyed. We presently are unable to verify the extent of damage, but earlier reports of extensive fire damage have not been confirmed. If REO personnel are able to visit the area near the IIP building on February 23, we will provide an update. End comment.)

¶4. (SBU) Al Arabiya television reported that the Sunni Al Ashra Mubashrah mosque, located in the Al Ma'qil area of Basrah, had been destroyed. Agence France Presse reported that a mosque in the Al Zubair area of Basrah had been attacked. Somerai television reported that the Iraqi Army had been deployed in Basrah and was guarding the Talha grave, a Sunni holy site,

located on the main road to Zubair.

¶5. (SBU) The Basrah Provincial Council (BPC) convened an emergency session to decide on a course of action. Sadr and Fadillah party members reportedly gathered on outside of the council building, calling for an investigation into the attack on the Golden Mosque in Samarra.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The situation in Basrah remains very tense, and more demonstrations are expected in the days ahead. There is increased reporting of the possibility of indirect fire at the Basrah Palace compound on February 22, and the REO expects that local demonstrations will disrupt its normal interactions with contacts for the next few days. With REO local staff released from work until February 26, our best sources for information have been diminished, but we will continue to report developments as we obtain information. End Comment.

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